Comments on *Partnership for Capacity Building in Africa*
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The ***Partnership for Capacity Building in Africa*** (PCBA) is to be commended for its serious attempt to understand the problems inherent in existing relationships between the donor community and African countries, for the long process of consultation with Africans that accompanied and informed the exercise, and for the extent to which it boldly commits to an approach that breaks significantly with the problematic aspects of the existing relationship and gives more say to African participants in determining how such a new approach is to be structured.

I start by listing some aspects of the draft PCBA report that could be improved, and then make some suggestions as to how the improvements might be made. I divide my comments into two sections: (1) raising questions, and (2) suggestions. I add a few minor observations at the end. In developing these comments, I have kept in mind the Questions for Reviewers provided by Cheryl Gray.

I - Questions

1. The analysis

Despite the report's call for a new approach to Africa's problems, its analyses of them (as well as the proposed solutions--more below) have an "old" quality to them. Even though I am not an African specialist, I have seen them many times in WB and other writings. This is not consistent with the report's claim to a "new" approach. In particular, the characterization of the African development experience seems too monolithic--painted as a failure, as rife with corruption, administrative and political incompetence, and with civil society nowhere to be seen, either because it is repressed or too weak to make a stand. I will leave it to the African specialists to argue with such a monolithic portrayal on the grounds of accuracy.

What is problematic about the monolithically negative portrayal for the PCBA is that such an initiative needs to be built on an understanding of why some things have worked (within countries, as well as between countries) and others have not. For example, the report states that "management, poor policies, and weak institutions" have prevented African agriculture from achieving "high levels of growth leading to poverty reduction and improved living standards." But we know that there are significant exceptions in some countries and/or in certain regions. Cases like these should provide us with the lessons that feed into the strategies and remedies proposed in the report. For an exercise like this--especially one that seeks to escape from the imposition of foreign models--the more positive outcomes cannot afford to be neglected because they should form the basis of an argument about what is *likely* to work.

The monolithically negative portrayal is also problematic because it is like typical donor portrayals of Africa that many Africans have found insulting. In that sense, it is somewhat jarring in a report claiming to represent a more African view. Correspondingly, the portrayal of such unrelieved incompetence and corruption could be self-defeating, because it may not inspire much confidence in donors being asked to commit more than a billion dollars to an undertaking that puts so much decision-making capacity in African hands.

The "systemic" nature of the portrayal of Africa's problems--all bad things go together in an analytically neat and closed circle of underdevelopment and incapacity--hinders one's ability to figure out how to intervene, to identify the point of entry. The similarly "systemic" nature of the report's recommended approach--"integrated" and "not piecemeal" (p. 3)--also seems unrealistic in light of what has been learned from past experience with "integrated" approaches. If the analysis of Africa's problems could show contrasts, contradictions, and jagged edges, including some bright spots, this would help indicate paths of entry into the problem.

The negatively monolithic portrayal of Africa also creates trouble for some of the suggestions the report makes. For example, the proposed scheme bars from participation those countries that do not have "good governance, open society, the rule of law, and proper accountability" (p. 59, note 6). But this would seem to exclude most African countries, at least as characterized by the report's own analysis.

I find these criteria for excluding certain countries from participation confusing for other reasons as well. First, the stated purpose of the PCBA is to contribute to the *building* of these very qualities--proper accountability, good governance, strengthened civil society, etc. Second, there are always islands of institutional promise in badly-governed countries. Isn't it important to see them as opportunities to at least set those countries on a path toward good governance? In this sense, it is something more like the "piecemeal" approach that one wants, though it would be more accurately described as an "incrementalist" strategy of bringing about change--distinctly not "integrated." Third, such broad grounds for exclusion, because their vagueness allows considerable room for interpretation, could simply open the door for capricious and idiosyncratic selection, depending on whoever was in charge at a particular moment.

Could a set of criteria for judging grant proposals be devised that would favor those activities that seemed to be on the path toward improving governance, accountability, etc.? These kinds of selection criteria would also act as incentives to movement in the desired direction.

Finally, the portrayal of the African continent as basket-case implies a kind of African "exceptionalism" that, regardless of its justifiability, makes it difficult to learn from and apply lessons being learned in other, non-African countries. If Africa is so uniquely bad, and so resistant to development as a continent, then the solution must also be unique. There's not much to be learned, that is, from the experience of other continents.

While reading the PCBA report, for example, I was reminded of an article written some years ago by Uma Lele, which looked into the reasons for poor performance of rural development projects in East Africa. Bringing to bear on this case the experience of the Indian case, she pointed out that the Indian successes in dramatically increasing agricultural productivity were preceded by years and years of patient and unglamorous investment of funds and technical assistance in the building of agricultural research institutions. During this long period, of course, there was no immediate return in increased agricultural productivity.

Lele criticized the unsuccessful African experience with IRDP programs, then, not for its peculiarly "African" elements (endemically corrupt and inadequate administration, etc.), but for the fact that the governments and the World Bank had invested heavily in rural development projects without first investing in the building of capacity of the agricultural research institutions. This is the kind of lesson that the PCBA should be able to draw from the experience of other continents. The African "exceptionalist" perspective precludes the learning of such lessons.

I am not suggesting that the report go to the other extreme and project a monolithically rosy view of the African scene--but only that it reflect the variety of bad *and* good that exist within and between countries, in which opportunities for improvement inhere.

2. The remedies

Most of the report's priorities and suggestions to remedy Africa's problems are perfectly acceptable. But they are too numerous, too vague, and have a "Christmas-list" quality to them (see, e.g., pp. 15-17). (Many are also "boilerplate"--I have seen them in many WB and other donor reports, even for countries outside Africa.) In some ways, they remind me of the justifications and proposals for the integrated rural development projects of the 1970s and 1980s: donors, along with governments, were capable of doing *everything* at one time, and had to if they were going to make any impact on the problem--namely, health, education, micro-enterprise assistance, roads, drinking water, electrification, irrigation, and agriculture credit, research, and extension.

It's not that any single one of these interventions would not improve things markedly, or that it would not be desirable to achieve all these things at once. Rather, experience has shown that the all-together-at-once approach does not work because it's too complex and too organizationally demanding. One needs an incrementalist *strategy*, which is quite different from the piecemeal-ism that the report rejects.

The report should explicitly choose to include some actions and objectives and *exclude* others, and indicate the reasons for such decisions and such a ranking of priorities. There are various clear criteria one could choose for supporting some activities and excluding others: for example, (a) some are easier than others and therefore more likely to actually work, (b) the problems that some of the proposed goals are meant to remedy are of greater urgency than others, (c) some initiatives create conditions that make other interventions easier to carry out, or even contribute toward reducing the lower-priority problem itself, (d) some initiatives are better suited to the kind of organization that the PCBA proposes to set up.

After reading initially of the extensive consultations in Africa that led up to this report, I expected that the report would provide a sense of the varied commentaries and suggestions, grounded in different country experiences, that would have emerged from these consultations. It was difficult to believe that such an extensive set of consultations among Africans would have yielded an analysis of the problem and a set of suggestions that sounded like so many other World Bank and other donor reports I have read. Perhaps the quality of those findings was lost in the attempt to generalize. Couldn't that source be better mined?

3. The new entity and the size of the program

After reading about the major inroads that the PCBA hoped to make in Africa's problems, and the comprehensive and ambitious listing of fundable activities and objectives (from creating civil society to mending Africa's universities to increasing accountability of government institutions to microcredit programs for small businesses), I was surprised to see that the initiative involved funding of only $8 million per year in each country for five years. It is not that the ability to have an impact is related to the amount of money spent. Rather, this relatively low level of spending in each country would seem to dictate a highly strategic and focused approach to grant-making that would clearly specify (a) certain areas of priority, and/or (b) types of interventions where the marginal impact of a small amount of funding was likely to be high, *based on past experience*, and/or (c) activities for which the need to monitor would be relatively lower (more on this below).

Take the example of helping sick universities. Even if only partially successful, this would constitute a significant contribution to Africa's development, and would be an appropriate area for such a grant-funded program. What would be the way to focus on this problem, given this particular level of funding and time-span? (Or is it not feasible?--in which case, this particular task should be excluded?) What is the relevant experience that can be brought to bear on such an endeavor? Could this be one of a few priorities, at least in the first years? If not, why not? With respect to the need to focus, I cannot imagine such a funding initiative being successful at putting some universities on its feet *and* creating free-standing "centers of excellence" within the initial five-year period. A choice would have to be made.

David Leonard published a proposal some years ago in *World Development*, which aimed to help bring highly trained (and highly-earning) African professionals back to their countries. I don't remember the details, but it was clever and was widely circulated. Though the PCBA might not necessarily be interested in this particular proposal, this kind of thinking is an example of a kind of focus, concreteness, and proposal-making that would help improve the report.

Similarly, I was rather confused about what the proposed institution would do, in terms of its grantmaking. It seemed that the new entity would fund a large number of different types of things--from helping civil society to funding and supporting microcredit programs. But these are highly different activities, requiring different kinds of projects and support. Also, much of the text gives the impression that the PCBA would fund mainly "soft" initiatives--restoring sick universities to health, strengthening judiciaries and public auditing departments, building civil society. But the monitoring-and-evaluation section emphasizes rates of return and economic impact analysis (p. 71), which is not suited to these kinds of interventions. Some explicit clarifications are necessary

The suitability of the grant (vs. loan) mechanism, of course, depends on the type of project. Grants were preferred, I assume, because they are much less administratively demanding--a good enough reason, in my view. But if that is the case, then this requires excluding activities that are suited to loan funding--like micro-lending and other services where charges are normally levied or where increased production lends itself to measurement.

I also wasn't clear as to what the proposed institution would be *like*. First, I thought it was like a small regional development bank, without the investments in infrastructure; then, like a technical assistance agency; then, like a foundation such as Rockefeller or Ford; then, a small donor giving myriad grants to NGOs without much overall impact. Would there be a few projects of $1 million apiece, or many projects of $50,000 apiece? It would help if the report specify what other existing institution this proposed entity would be roughly like, and *not* like. Given the need to narrow down, moreover, it might make sense to propose a first experimental phase during which only one or a few particular types of activity would be funded--perhaps a suggestion emerging out of the many consultations. Then decisions could be made about subsequent phases, based on the results of that first phase.

For the level of funding proposed for the PCBA, and the seeming large number of small projects, the reliance on monitoring, evaluation, and accountability that was projected seemed unrealistic--particularly given the low percentage of the funding projected for administration. Most organizations administering grants of this size simply do not have the capacity to engage in the kind of monitoring and verification of results portrayed in the report. This is even true of respected organizations in the United States like the Ford Foundation, let alone a new agency in a continent that is said to be rife with problems of accountability. All this suggests that activities for funding should be selected that either have a respectable record of accountability already (the report should list some), or that suffer less from lack of monitoring than others. This latter characteristic will be determined by (a) the nature of the activity, (b) the track record of the organization, and/or (c) the propensity for "natural" monitoring in the project's environment.

One example of the latter would be subprojects that have a kind of "built-in," "natural" monitoring coming from outsiders in the community where the project was located. The Bank itself has had some experience with encouraging or even formally contracting outsider local groups to monitor the programs it funds--providing them with the information necessary to do this. Many civic associations and NGOs complain precisely of the lack of this kind of information about what government or other powerful actors in their world are planning to do. The provision of such information to groups outside a funded organization is unusual, in short, and often elicits the kind of monitoring one needs--often in informal ways and often without expending additional resources. As a by-product, of course, this kind of approach would also contribute to the civil-society-strengthening objectives of the program. The point is not to argue for any particular proposal here, but to suggest that the report itself could be more concrete in making such suggestions.

The report praises the "success" of three already-existing regional capacity building initiatives in Africa (p. 53)--ACBF, AERC, and AMSCO. It would be useful to know what had been learned about building effective regional African agencies from these three experiences. Why, moreover, is none of these agencies appropriate to manage the new initiative? If the existing entities are not effective agencies, what would be different about the proposed one that would make the proposed entity more effective, or would avoid any problems now afflicting these existing regional initiatives? Why is it necessary to create a separate institution at the regional level and in each participating country (the national capacity secretariats), rather than placing this initiative in an existing one?

In this sense, it is somewhat ironic that the report goes into some detail about the Bank's having learned from the past "mistake" of creating separate project units in the past, rather than trying to figure out how to make programs work in existing entities. Since the report provides considerable detail about why these separate units had been a mistake, and what had been learned from this experience, this cannot help but place into the reader's mind a parallel set of reservations about the proposed separate and new facility.

It is not that new entities are necessarily always unwise, but that there seemed to be no clear justification for creating them in a case where so little funds were being managed--at least at the national (as opposed to regional) level. The report should say what it is about these particular proposed new entities that makes them less subject to the problems familiar to us from other such cases.

II - Suggestions

1. New vs. old

The report could be more explicit and detailed about what is "new" about what it is proposing. It actually promises to do so, at least implicitly, by saying that it "seeks to avoid the approaches and attitudes by African development partners that have proved to be faulty in previous efforts..." (Box 4.1, p. 54). It needs to elaborate these criticisms (the only one I remember relates to expatriate technical assistance), and to show how its recommendations represent distinct improvements over the way things have been done in the past.

For example, the report mentions in several places its critique of expatriate technical assistance. This led me to expect an interesting proposal in this area, which nevertheless did not emerge. The only proposal of this nature, in fact, was the "basic tenet" of using technical assistance "sparingly" (p. iii). But this seems to be throwing away the baby with the bathwater. Technical assistance provided by experienced people from the country or the region--especially people who have been intimately involved in successful African experiences, at local as well as national levels--can have quite powerful impacts, and is not necessarily costly.

2. Monolithic vs. mixed results

In order to be realistic, an exercise of this nature must convince the reader by building on an understanding of what has worked better in Africa in the areas of interest to the PCBA. If it wants to build universities, for example, what African experiences can it look to that have worked better and that could be used as guidelines for how to proceed? If it wants to make government agencies more accountable, what strategy would it follow that has worked somewhere in Africa? If it wants the CGIAR centers to integrate more closely with the national centers, what experiences can it point to where this actually happened, even if only partially, and what were the lessons learned that could be applied to other cases? After all, this latter objective (regarding CGIAR centers)--and the critique of the existing situation that it implies--has been on the to-fix list of donor evaluations for many years. If it hasn't been fixed by now, what is different about the PCBA approach that would lead the reader to believe that it can be fixed this time around?

To win the confidence of funders for such an initiative, it would seem, the PCBA would have to lay something on the table that was convincing because it was somehow different than what is usually proposed, and was grounded in positive African experiences.

3. Donor vs. non-donor initiatives

The report could strengthen its claim for a more Afro-centric institutional base and decision-making power by citing cases of improved agency performance or other such initiatives that had little to do with donors. For example, the report stresses the need to get away from expatriate technical assistance and donor dominance in other forms, but many of the better-working initiatives it cites seem to be donor-funded and with heavy donor involvement, including technical assistance (e.g., AGETIP/World Bank [Box 3.11, p. 29]; Kenya Enhanced Commodity Distribution System/USAID [Box 3.21, P. 51]; Tanzania Improved Management of

Environmental Information/UNDP [Box 3.17, p. 44]; Uganda--Building Capacity of Small Private Firms/IDA [Box 3/10, p. 28]).
I remember being struck, when working on an evaluation for the South African government of a set of 110 squatter upgrading and sites-and-services projects, that the South African government was so strongly behind such a program (as opposed to 'low-cost housing') without any serious involvement of the World Bank. (This set of programs started with the de Klerk government, three years before Mandela's election, and continued thereafter.) Few countries had ever undertaken the sites-and-services and upgrading approach to low-cost housing without Bank insistence and funding; and the Bank-funded projects usually involved one or only a few such projects in any particular country, not the dozens of the South African case. Indeed, the South African projects were implemented unusually rapidly, at least in comparison to many Bank sites-and-services projects; they went further in decentralizing project administration and incentives than any Bank project; and they represented an unusual commitment to labor-intensive construction, something the Bank has tried very hard to do in other African countries, particularly in rural roadbuilding. Might this homegrown South African experience have any bearing on such attempts in other African countries?

The three most important factors in understanding these impressive developments in South Africa were: political (the de Klerk government was worried about the upcoming elections and the demand for housing was quite politically salient), fiscal (the government was able to sell off strategic reserves because of the end of the economic boycott and therefore had windfall resources), and administrative (there was a long history--within and outside government--of working on this issue and becoming familiarized with these kinds of approaches).

These are the kinds of examples (though many of them may be more modest than this one), and the lessons learned from them, that should form the basis of the recommendations of such a report. Those who carried out such programs, and understand why they worked and what parts worked better than others, should also be drawn upon for technical assistance on similar projects in other countries. (I thought that this recommendation was one that the report might be leading up to when it made its initial criticism of expatriate technical assistance.)

As I wrote the above South African story, I could imagine the readers saying, "But South Africa is an exception, so...." Although South Africa, or this story, may be an exception, seeing it as such is to deprive this kind of exercise of the value to be learned from such cases of better performance. Calling them exceptions is to dismiss their value as examples to be learned from. This contributes as much to an outsider-dominated approach to development problems in Africa as donor power itself.

Linking suggestions to existing positive experiences in Africa, in sum, would be a way of saying something "new," and of avoiding the "old-sounding" and all-encompassing suggestions of the report.

III - Other suggestions

1. I was confused about the purpose of the boxes. Some of them, about specific projects, seemed to indicate the type of project that would be funded under the initiative--AGETIP, for example, and a small-firm program in Uganda, BUDS. They also seemed to represent examples of successful projects, or at least to imply that. But some, like the Uganda project BUDS, reported only one year of operation, long before one could claim success for a particular intervention of this nature (Box 3.10, p. 28).
The AGETIP example, as detailed in the box, seemed questionable as a model for this new approach--at least according to the PCBA's stated goals with respect to donor-African relationships. The AGETIP-type projects have had strong donor funding and involvement, including non-African technical assistance--from the World Bank *and* ILO. In other ways they may not represent--at least up to now--a model that fits the PCBA's objectives.[1]
The subprojects of the PCBA's proposed program, finally, would seem to be too modest for an AGETIP-type effort, with its costly investments in physical infrastructure. So what was AGETIP supposed to be an example of? If there are indeed positive African experiences without heavy donor involvement that could be built upon, they should be an integral part of the text because the suggestions should flow from them.

2. I disagree with the guiding suggestion that appears in a few places that Africa's problems are a result of "priority of politics over economics" (p. 6)--and that economics should have a priority over politics. Many of the goals of this initiative, if they are to be achieved, will be deeply embedded in political processes. To fail to understand how the political piece contributes to successful outcomes, and to attribute achievements to "apolitical" processes, is to misread the lessons to be learned from such cases. In addition, an argument that associates bad outcomes with politics and good outcomes with "a-politics" is implicitly anti-democratic. Politics is an essential part of an effective democracy, and it is always a part of any story of good government performance, as well as bad. For similar reasons, and in the spirit of the report's concern about governance in Africa, I would not have omitted "elected officials" from the list on p. ii of a "continent transformed...by African technical, professional, and managerial personnel...."

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[1]For example, according to a recent OED Evaluation Brief (which was otherwise quite positive), little maintenance of this newly constructed physical capital was forthcoming, nor were institutional arrangements for maintenance in place. Although this is a serious problem, it is quite "old," having afflicted all kinds of infrastructure projects in developing countries, particularly roads and water; it long pre-dates the AGETIP model. The infrastructure department of the Bank itself has recognized the seriousness of this kind of problem for many years: failure to maintain seriously compromises the rates of return of road and water construction projects because of premature deterioration and even loss of the facility. A successful model, at least for the kinds of objectives stated in the PCBA report would, by definition, have solved this problem--or at least be pointed in that direction. Routine maintenance and repair, it might be added, generates significant employment activity--another important goal of the PCBA report.

3. There seemed to be some assertions in the report that could not be justified or were not true. On p. 57, for example, a "key attribute" of the Trust Fund was said to be a "high rate of return" on the funds. I was not sure what this meant, since the proposed Trust Fund seemed to be a *grant*-making agency; also, many of its funded activities would not lend themselves to measuring rates of return. Also, the "cost-effectiveness" of the proposed fund was attributed to its "bypass[ing] government" and the targeting of funds to "specific individuals." But there is no prima facie evidence that this would lead to high rather than low rates of return in any particular case.

4. This is quite minor, but it wasn't clear why the term "business" plan is being used. The operation seems to have more in common with public-sector or nongovernment/nonprofit operations than with a business.

5. It would be useful to know why only 12 countries participated in the consultations, and why those particular countries.